



MONTESQUIEU

*ESSAY ON TASTE*

## Montesquieu, “On Taste”, from the *Encyclopédie*

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*To this excellent article we shall add the fragment on taste, which M. le Président de Montesquieu intended for the Encyclopédie, as we mentioned at the end of his eulogy in Volume V of this work. This fragment was found incomplete among his papers: the author did not have the time to put the finishing touches to it. But the first thoughts of great writers are worthy of being preserved for posterity, like the sketches of great painters .<sup>1</sup>*

### **Essay on taste in matters of nature and of art**

In our present mode of existence our soul experiences three kinds of pleasures: some it derives from its own existence, others result from its union with the body, others again take their origin in the habits and prejudices acquired from certain institutions, customs, and conventions.

These different pleasures of our soul constitute the objects of taste, such as whatever is beautiful, good, pleasant, naïve, delicate, tender, graceful, noble, great, sublime, majestic, endowed with *je ne sais quoi* , etc. For example, when we find pleasure in seeing something that is useful for us, we say that it is good ; when we find pleasure in seeing it, without discerning for the moment any utility in it, we call it beautiful .

The ancients did not see this clearly. They looked on all the relative qualities of our soul as being real qualities. As a result, those dialogues in which Plato has Socrates develop his arguments—dialogues that were so admired by the ancients—are untenable today, because they are based on a false philosophy: for there is no longer any meaning to arguments that treat what is good, beautiful, perfect, wise, mad, hard, soft, dry, and humid as if these were real entities.

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<sup>1</sup> Nelly S. Hoyt and Thomas Cassirer, trans., *The Encyclopedia: Selections: Diderot, d'Alembert and a Society of Men of Letters* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965).

The source of what is beautiful, good, pleasing, etc., lies in ourselves. When we seek to discover its origin, we are in fact seeking the causes of the pleasures felt by our soul.

Let us therefore examine our soul, study it as it appears in its actions and its passions, and seek its nature in its pleasures, for this is where it reveals itself most clearly. Poetry, painting, sculpture, architecture, music, dance, different kinds of games, all the works of nature and art can give pleasure to the soul. Let us see why, how, and when they give this pleasure, and let us account for our opinions. This may help us to educate and mold our taste, which is only another word for the gift of subtly and rapidly discovering the degree of pleasure men can derive from any object.

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### **Concerning the pleasures of our soul .**

The soul experiences pleasures that are its own. These are distinct from the pleasures it receives from the senses, and they are experienced independently from the latter. Such are the pleasures inspired by curiosity, by ideas concerning the soul's greatness and perfection, by the perception of its existence in contrast with the awareness of night, by the pleasure of comprehending a general idea in its entirety, of seeing a great number of things, etc., of comparing, linking, and separating ideas. These pleasures are in the nature of the soul and independent of the senses, because they are proper to every thinking being. It would be quite immaterial to examine here whether these pleasures belong to the soul as substance in union with the body, or separated from it, because they always exist and are the objects of taste. Thus we shall not draw a distinction here between the pleasures which the soul derives from its nature, and those which it derives from its union with the body. We shall call all these, "natural pleasures," to be distinguished from acquired pleasures, which the soul enjoys by means of certain associations with natural pleasures. In the same way and for the same reason we shall distinguish between natural and acquired taste.

It is useful to know the source of the pleasures for which taste is the criterion: A knowledge of natural and acquired pleasures might serve to correct both our natural and our acquired taste. In order to gauge the pleasures of our being, in some cases even merely to experience them, we must begin by describing the conditions of our existence so as to know what its pleasures are.

If our soul had not been united with body, it would have had knowledge, and it is likely that it would have loved what it knew. At present we love almost exclusively what we do not know.

The way in which we are constituted is entirely arbitrary. We could have been made as we are or differently; but if we had been made differently, we would have felt differently; an organ more or less in our machine would have produced a new eloquence, a new poetry; a different make-up of the same organs would have produced still another kind of poetry. For example, if the constitution of our organs made us capable of greater concentration, this would do away with all the rules that keep the arrangement of a subject in proportion to the length of our concentration; if we were capable of a greater penetration, this would put an end to all the rules based on the degree of our penetration. In a word, all the laws that derive from the fact that our machine is made in a certain fashion would change if our machine were made differently.

If our vision were weaker and dimmer, fewer moldings and more uniformity would have been required in architectural members; if our vision were more distinct and our soul capable of comprehending more things at one time, more ornaments would have been required in architecture. If our ears were made like those of certain animals, many of our musical instruments would have to be modified. I am well aware that objects would still have stood in the same relation to each other, but since their relation to us would have changed, objects, which under present conditions have a certain effect on us, would no longer have this effect. Since perfection in the arts consists in presenting objects to us in such a way that they cause us as much pleasure as possible, there would

have to be changes in the arts once our pleasure depended on new circumstances.

At first it seems that we need only know the diverse sources of our pleasures in order to acquire taste, and that once we had read what philosophy tells us on this subject, we would have good taste and could boldly judge works of art. But natural taste is not the same as theoretical knowledge. It consists in the rapid and subtle application of the very rules which we do not know. It is not necessary to know that surprise is the cause of the pleasure we derive from a certain object which we find beautiful; it is enough if it surprises us, and surprises us to the extent that it should, neither more nor less.

Thus what we may say here, and all the precepts for the education of taste which we may give, can be applied only to acquired taste; or we might say that directly it concerns only acquired taste, although indirectly acquired taste touches on natural taste; for acquired taste affects, changes, increases, and diminishes natural taste, just as natural taste affects, changes, increases, and diminishes acquired taste.

When we do not consider whether it is good or bad, true or false, taste in its most general definition is whatever forms a bond based on feeling between us and an object. This does not mean that the term cannot be applied to intellectual matters. Their knowledge brings so much pleasure to the soul that certain philosophers have been unable to comprehend any other kind of felicity. The soul knows by means of its ideas and its feelings, and its ideas and feelings are the source of its pleasure; for although we may oppose idea to feeling, the soul feels an object when it sees it. There are no objects so intellectual that the soul does not either see them or at least believe it sees them, and therefore it feels them as well.

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### **Concerning intelligence in general .**

Intelligence is a genus and includes several species: genius, good sense, discernment, discrimination, talent, taste.

Intelligence consists in having organs that are well formed for dealing with the objects of its activity. If the object is very restricted in scope, intelligence is called talent. If intelligence is closer to a certain kind of refined pleasure enjoyed by men in good society, it is called taste. If the particular object is the only one for a nation, talent is called spirit, such as the art of war and agriculture among the Romans, hunting among the savages, etc.

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### **Concerning curiosity .**

Our soul is meant to think, which is to perceive. Now such a being must be endowed with curiosity: since all objects are in a chain where each idea both precedes and follows another, it is impossible to wish to see one object without desiring to see another one, and if we did not feel desire for the latter, we would not take pleasure in the former. Thus when we are shown part of a picture, our desire to see the part that is hidden is in proportion to the pleasure we have taken in the part we have already seen.

The pleasure given us by one object inclines us toward another. This is why the soul always seeks new objects and is never at rest.

Therefore one sure means of always pleasing the soul is to present it with many objects or with a greater number than it had expected to see.

This explains why we take pleasure in seeing a symmetrically ordered garden, and yet also in seeing a wild and rustic spot. Both these effects are produced by the same cause.

Since we like to see a large number of objects, we would like to expand our vision, to be in several places and to cover greater distances. Our soul

abhors limits, it would like, so to speak, to widen the sphere of its presence; it derives great pleasure, for instance, from looking into the distance. But how can this be done? In the cities our vision is limited by houses, in the countryside by a thousand obstacles: we can barely see three or four trees. Art comes to our rescue and lifts the veil behind which nature conceals herself. We love art and we love it more than nature, that is to say, nature which is hidden from our eyes. When, however, we find a beautiful view, when our vision is freed and can see far in the distance meadows, brooks, hills, and those arrangements which are, so to speak, created expressly for our pleasure, then our soul experiences far greater delight than in seeing the gardens of Le Nôtre, [10] because nature does not imitate itself, while the creations of art always resemble each other. It is for this reason that in painting we prefer a landscape to the most beautifully laid out garden; for painting preserves only the beauty of nature, the views where the eye can range far into the distance and in all directions, and the sites where nature is varied and can be contemplated with pleasure.

Expression of thought becomes great when it opens our eyes to more than what is actually said, and when we perceive immediately what otherwise would have required a great deal of reading.

Florus shows us all of Hannibal's faults in a few words: "At a time when he could make use of his victory, he preferred to enjoy it." *Cum victoria posset uti, frui maluit* . [11]

He gives us an impression of the entire Macedonian war, when he says: "To enter was to vanquish." *Introisse victoria fuit* . [12]

He gives us all of Scipio's life at a glance, when he says of his youth: "This is the Scipio who is growing up to destroy Africa." *Hic erit Scipio, qui in exitum Africae crescit* . [13] One seems to see a child who grows and attains the stature of a giant.

Then he shows us the character of Hannibal, the situation of the world, and the greatness of the Roman people, when he says: "Hannibal in flight

sought throughout the world to find an enemy in the Roman people." Qui profugus ex Africa, hostem populo Romano toto orbe quaerebat . [14]

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### **Concerning the pleasure derived from order .**

It is not enough to show the soul many objects, they must be shown in order, for thus we remember what we have seen and we begin to imagine what we shall see. Then our soul is proud of its range and penetration. In a work in which there is no order, the soul feels at every moment that the order which it wants to introduce is being destroyed. The sequence which the author has created becomes confused with the sequence which we create for ourselves; the soul remembers nothing and foresees nothing; it feels humiliated by the confusion of its ideas and the inanity of what remains in the mind; it exhausts itself to no purpose and cannot experience any pleasure. For these reasons order is always introduced even into confusion, unless the aim is to express or reveal this confusion. This is why painters group their figures; and those who depict battles place in the foreground of their pictures whatever the eye is intended to see distinctly, while relegating confusion to the background and the more distant scenes.

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### **Concerning the pleasures of variety .**

While we need order, we also need variety, otherwise the soul languishes. Things that are similar appear the same to the soul, and if the part of a picture that is being revealed to us resembled another part that we had already seen, then this object, even though new, would not seem new and therefore would not give us any pleasure. Since the beauty of works of art, and of the creations of nature, comes only from the pleasures they can give us, these works must be capable of giving the greatest variety of pleasures; the soul must be shown things it has not yet



seen, it must be inspired with a feeling that differs from the one it has just experienced.

So it is that historical narratives delight us by the variety in their manner of telling, novels by the variety of marvels they relate, plays by the variety of passions presented; and so it is that those who know how to teach modify as much as they can the tedium of instruction.

Everything becomes unbearable with lengthy uniformity: periods recurring in the same order over a long time weary us in a speech, and the repetition of the same balanced and well-rounded phrasing bores us in a long poem, If it were true that the famous tree-lined highway from Moscow to Petersburg was actually built, a traveler would die of boredom closed in between the two rows of trees. Someone who has been traveling for a long time through the Alps will, by the time he descends from the mountains, have lost all interest in even the most beautiful sites and the most charming views.

We have already stated that the soul loves variety only because it is meant to know and to see. Thus it has to be able to see, and variety must permit this, that is to say that what the soul sees must be simple enough to be perceived, and varied enough to be perceived with pleasure.

There are objects which seem to have variety and do not have it, and others which appear to be uniform and yet have a great deal of variety.

Gothic architecture appears to have great variety, but the disorder of Gothic ornaments tires the eye because of their small size, and thus we cannot distinguish one from another. Moreover the ornaments are so numerous that the eye cannot dwell on any one of them. Because of this, Gothic architecture offends our taste by means of the very elements designed to render it pleasing.

A building in the Gothic style presents a kind of enigma to the eye that sees it, and the soul is as perplexed as when it is confronted by an obscure poem. [15]

Greek architecture, on the contrary, appears uniform. Yet it has the kind of variety that makes us look with pleasure on an object, because it has the necessary divisions, and as many as are needed, so that the soul can see exactly as much as it can comprehend without becoming tired and can see enough to occupy its faculties.

Large objects must have large parts. Tall men have long arms, tall trees large branches, and high mountains are part of vast mountain ranges; all this is in the nature of things.

Greek architecture is divided into a few large parts and thus imitates whatever is great. The soul feels it to be permeated with an aura of majesty.

Similarly painting divides the figures it represents on the canvas, into groups of three or four; it imitates nature, where a large herd always divides into smaller groups. In the same manner painting also separates its lights and shades into large surfaces.

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### **Concerning the pleasures of symmetry .**

I have said that the soul loves variety; yet in most things it likes to recognize a kind of symmetry. To all appearances there is some contradiction in this; here is how I explain it:

When our soul sees objects, one of the principal causes of the pleasure it feels lies in the ease with which it perceives them. Symmetry is pleasing to the soul, because it saves the soul labor, brings it relief, and, in a manner of speaking, cuts the soul's work by half.

This gives rise to a general rule: Wherever symmetry is useful to the soul and can further its functions, the soul finds it pleasant; but wherever it is useless, it is tedious because it destroys variety. Objects that we perceive one after the other must be varied because our soul sees them without difficulty; those perceived at a glance, on the other hand, must have

symmetry. Thus, since we perceive at a glance the façade of a building, a flower bed or a temple, these are arranged symmetrically and delight the soul by the ease with which it can take in the entire object at once. [16]

An object that should be seen at a glance must be simple. Therefore, it must have unity and all the parts must relate to the whole. Here we have another reason why symmetry is preferred: it produces a homogeneous whole.

It is natural for a whole to be complete, and the soul that sees this whole wants it to have no imperfect part. This is another reason why symmetry is preferred: we need a kind of equipoise or balance, and a building with only one wing, or with one wing shorter than another, is just as unfinished as a body with one arm, or with an arm that is too short.

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### **Concerning contrasts .**

The soul loves symmetry, but it also loves contrasts. This requires a great deal of explanation. For instance:

While nature requires painters and sculptors to introduce symmetry into the various parts of their figures, it demands on the other hand that they introduce contrasts into the attitudes of these figures. A foot placed in the same position as another, a limb that moves like another, these are unbearable. The reason for this is that their symmetry results almost always in a repetition of the same attitudes, as we see in Gothic figures, which are all similar on account of this. Then the products of art lose all variety. Moreover nature has not given us such a posture; she gave us movement and did not fix our actions and our behavior as if we were figurines. If we cannot bear to see men under such constraint, what effect will a work of art of this type have on us?

Therefore, figures must be presented in contrasting attitudes, especially in sculpture, which is by nature cold; sculpture can only express the fire of life through strong contrasts and a striking position.

However, just as we noted that when men tried to introduce variety into Gothic style they produced uniformity, so it has frequently happened that men sought to introduce variety by means of contrasts and achieved only symmetry and ugly uniformity.

This can be felt not only in certain sculptures and paintings but also in the style of writers who in every sentence introduce a contrast between the beginning and the end by means of one antithesis after another. Among these are Saint Augustine and other late Latin authors as well as some of our moderns, such as Saint-Evremond. Their turn of phrase, always the same and always monotonous, is very repellent: such perpetual contrast turns into symmetry, and their continual, labored antithesis becomes monotony.

The mind finds little variety in such a style. Once you have seen one part of the sentence, you will always guess the other. You see words that are contrasted, but they are always contrasted in the same manner; you see a turn of phrase in the sentence, but it is always the same one.

Many painters have the fault of indiscriminately placing contrasts everywhere, so that when we see a figure we are immediately led to anticipate the arrangement of the figure next to it. This continual diversity results in a certain kind of similarity. Furthermore, when nature produces disorder, it does so without continually emphasizing contrasts, nor does it place all bodies in motion, and constrained motion at that. Nature is more varied, it places some bodies in repose and gives to others movements of different kinds.

The part of the soul which knows, and the part which feels have an equal love for variety. The soul cannot support the same situation for any length of time, because it is bound to a body that cannot endure this; our soul can only be stimulated when the spirits flow through the nerves. Now there are two obstacles to this: fatigue of the nerves, and cessation of the spirits that either no longer flow or disappear from the places where they formerly flowed.

Thus everything tires us in the end, and keen pleasures in particular. We always turn away from them with the same feeling of contentment with which we seized upon them, for the fibers which served as organs for these pleasures are in need of rest. We must then use other fibers which are in better condition to serve us, and thus distribute the work, in a manner of speaking.

Our soul is tired of feeling. Yet not to feel is to fall into a prostration which wearies it. Everything is set right when we vary the activity of the soul; then the soul feels without tiring.

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### **Concerning the pleasures of surprise .**

Since the soul is always disposed to seek new objects, it enjoys all the pleasures that surprise can procure. Surprise is a feeling that is agreeable to the soul because its effect is rapid and attracts our attention. The soul perceives or feels something which it did not expect, or in a manner which it did not expect.

Something can surprise us because it excites wonder, or because it is new or unexpected. In the latter case the principal feeling of surprise is combined with a secondary feeling based on the fact that the object is new or unexpected.

It is for this reason that games of chance excite us; they make us see a continual succession of unexpected events. It is for the same reason that we delight in parlor games; they too constitute a succession of unexpected events, caused by a combination of skill and chance.

For this reason too we delight in seeing plays; they develop gradually, conceal events until they happen, continually prepare new surprises for us, and often stimulate us by revealing these surprises to be something we should have foreseen.

Witty works are read ordinarily only because they provide pleasant surprises and make up for the dullness of conversation, which is almost always listless and does not produce such effect.

Surprise can be produced by an object itself or by the manner in which it is perceived, for the object may appear to our eyes to be larger or smaller or different from what it really is. We may also see the object itself, but accompanied by an accessory idea that surprises us. In a particular object, the accessory idea can be the difficulty of making it, the person who made it, the time when it was made, the manner in which it was made, or some other accompanying circumstance.

Suetonius describes Nero's crimes with a composure that surprises us and almost makes us believe that he does not feel the horrors which he describes. Suddenly he changes his tone and writes: "After the universe had suffered this monster for fourteen years, he finally left it": *tale monstrum per quattuordecim annos perpeussus terrarum orbis tandem destituit* . [17] This calls forth different kinds of surprises in the mind: we are surprised by the change in the author's style, by our discovery that his opinions differ from what we had assumed, and by his manner of giving expression in so few words to one of the greatest revolutions that ever happened. Thus the soul discovers many different sentiments which act together to unsettle it and give it a feeling of pleasure.

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### **Concerning the diverse causes which may produce a feeling .**

It must be noted that a feeling ordinarily has more than one cause in our soul. Strength and variety of feeling is, if I may use the term, produced by a certain dosage of these causes. Intelligence consists in knowing how to strike several organs at once, and if we examine various writers, we will see perhaps that the best and those who have been the most popular are those who have aroused a greater number of simultaneous sensations in the soul.

Take a look, I beg you, at the multiplicity of causes: We prefer to see a neatly arranged garden rather than a disorderly mass of trees because (1) our vision is not blocked; (2) each avenue is a whole, and each forms an important object, while in a disorderly mass each tree is a whole and an unimportant object; (3) we see an arrangement we are not in the habit of seeing; (4) we are appreciative of the trouble that has been taken; (5) we admire with what care a ceaseless battle is waged against nature which attempts to cause total confusion by producing growth which was not required of it. This is so true, that we cannot bear to see a neglected garden. Sometimes we like the difficulty and sometimes the ease of execution, and just as in a magnificent garden we marvel at the greatness of its owner and at the expense to which he has gone, so we sometimes take pleasure in seeing that someone has had the skill to please us with little expense and work.

We like to gamble because it satisfies our avarice, that is to say, our hope of greater gain. Gambling flatters our vanity by fostering the idea that fortune prefers us and that our fellow men have their attention fixed on our good luck; it satisfies our curiosity by providing us with a spectacle. In a word, it affords us the diverse pleasures of surprise.

We find the dance pleasing because of its lightness, its particular grace, the beauty and variety of its poses, and its connection with music, the dancer being like an accompanying instrument. Above all, however, we find it appealing because our brain is so constituted that it imperceptibly reduces all movement to a few basic movements and a few basic poses.

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### **Concerning sensibility .**

Almost always we find things pleasing and displeasing from different points of view. For example, the Italian virtuosi [18] should give us little pleasure, (1) because it is not surprising that they sing well, fashioned as they are; they resemble an instrument from which wood has been cut away to make it produce music; (2) because we have too strong a suspicion that the passions they enact are false; (3) because they belong

neither to the sex we love nor to the sex we esteem. On the other hand we may find them pleasing because they retain for a very long time a youthful aspect, and also because they alone have flexible voices. Thus every object arouses a feeling in us which is composed of many other feelings that sometimes clash and weaken each other.

Often our soul makes up its own reasons for feeling pleasure. It succeeds in this mainly by establishing connections between objects: something which pleased us once pleases us again for the sole reason that it has already done so in the past, that is, because we connect the former and the present idea; thus an actress who delighted us on the stage also delights us offstage; her voice, her manner of delivery, the memory of the admiration she received, even the idea of the princess she played, brought into relation with what she is now, all this creates a kind of mixture which occasions a feeling of pleasure.

All of us are influenced by many secondary ideas. A woman of high reputation who has a slight defect can turn it to advantage so that everyone considers it one of her charms. Usually when we love a woman, this love springs only from a preconceived notion concerning her birth or her wealth and is fed by the marks of honor or esteem which she receives from others.

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### **Concerning refinement .**

People of refinement connect each idea or each taste with many secondary ideas or tastes. Coarse people experience only one sensation, their soul can neither combine nor analyze. They only have what nature gives them, and neither add to this nor take away from it. This is not true of people of refinement. In love, for instance, they compound most of the pleasures of love themselves. Polixenes and Apicius brought to the table many sensations which are unknown to us vulgar eaters, and those who judge works of the mind with taste, create for themselves and experience an infinity of sensations which other men lack.



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Concerning the "je ne sais quoi." [19] Persons or objects sometimes have an invisible charm, a natural grace which defies definition and perforce has been called je ne sais quoi . It seems to me that this effect is chiefly based on surprise. Our feelings are roused because a woman attracts us more than we had expected at first, and we are pleasantly surprised because she has been able to overcome defects which our eyes reveal to us but which our heart no longer believes to be true. This is the reason why ugly women very often have charm, while it is very rare for beautiful women to have it; for someone who is beautiful ordinarily acts in a manner contrary to our expectations and thus seems to us less worthy of love. Such a person first surprises us favorably, later unfavorably; but the favorable impression lies in the past while the unfavorable impression is fresh. Thus it is that beautiful women rarely arouse great passions; these are almost always addressed to women who have charm, that is, who have delightful qualities we did not expect and had no reason to expect. Elaborate dress rarely has charm, while the clothes worn by shepherdesses have it frequently. We admire the majesty with which Paul Veronese drapes his figures, but it is the simplicity of Raphael and the purity of Correggio that moves us. [20] Paul Veronese promises much and delivers what he promises. Raphael and Correggio promise little and deliver a great deal, and this pleases us even more.

Charm usually resides in the mind rather than the face, for a beautiful face immediately reveals its beauty and scarcely conceals anything, but the mind reveals itself little by little, only when it wishes and as much as it wishes; it can conceal itself in order to appear later and thus provide the kind of surprise that is the essence of charm.

Charm is found less in the features of the face than in behavior, for behavior varies with every moment and can at any time create surprise. In a word, a woman can be beautiful in only one way, but she is attractive in a hundred thousand ways.

The law of the two sexes ordains, in civilized and in savage nations, that men should do the asking and women should only grant what is asked of them. This causes charm to be more particularly a feminine quality. Since women have to defend everything about them, it is to their interest to conceal everything. The least word, the least gesture, everything they reveal without infringing on their first duty, every action that throws off constraint becomes an element of their charm. Such is the wisdom of nature that things which would be of no value without the law of modesty acquire infinite value, thanks to this fortunate law on which rests the happiness of the universe.

Since constraint and affectation cannot surprise us, charm is found neither in constrained nor in affected manners, but in a certain freedom or ease which lies between the two extremes. The soul is then agreeably surprised that both pitfalls have been avoided.

It would seem that it should be easiest to have natural manners, yet they are the most difficult, for our upbringing constrains us and makes us lose some of our naturalness; we are enchanted, however, when we see this naturalness reappear.

In dress we find nothing more pleasing than the appearance of carelessness, even disorder, that conceals from us all the careful preparations not required by cleanliness and only inspired by vanity. In the same way our wit is only charming when it appears spontaneous and not rehearsed.

When you say something that has cost you effort, you may well prove that you have wit, but not a charming wit. To show such charm you must not notice it yourself, and others must be mildly surprised to see it since a certain naïve and simple quality in you held out no such promise.

Charm cannot be acquired. In order to have it one must be naïve. But how can one make an effort to be naïve?

One of Homer's most beautiful inventions was the girdle that gave Aphrodite the gift of radiating delight. Nothing could better make us feel

the magic and the power of charm, which seems to be conferred on a person by an invisible hand and must be distinguished from beauty itself. This girdle could only have been given to Aphrodite; it would not be appropriate to Hera's majestic beauty, since majesty demands a certain gravity, that is to say, a constraint that is the opposite of the artlessness of charm; nor would it be very appropriate to Athena's proud beauty, because pride is the opposite of the gentleness of charm and can often be suspected, moreover, of affectation.

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### **The progression of surprise .**

We become aware of the presence of great beauty when something inspires us with a surprise which at first is only mild, but which continues, increases, and finally turns into admiration. Raphael's works impress us little at first glance: he imitates nature so well that we are at first no more astonished than we would be if we saw the object itself, which would not cause us any surprise at all. On the other hand the extraordinary manner of expression, the stronger colors, the bizarre forms of a lesser painter strike us at first glance, because we are not accustomed to seeing them. Raphael can be compared to Virgil, and the Venetian painters, with their constrained poses, to Lucan. [21] Virgil, who is more natural, is less striking at first but leaves a greater impression after a while. The opposite is true of Lucan.

The exact proportions of the famous church of Saint Peter make it seem at first glance smaller than it is, for we do not know at the outset on what we should base our ideas to judge its size. If it were not so wide, we would be struck by its length; if it were not so long, by its width. But as we examine it, our eye sees the church growing in size, and our astonishment increases. One can compare it to the Pyrenees: the eye thinks at first that it can take in their full measure, and then it discovers mountains behind mountains and strays ever farther into the distance.

Our soul often experiences pleasure when it feels something it cannot analyze, or when an object appears quite different from what it knows it

to be. This arouses a feeling of surprise which the soul cannot overcome. Here is an example of this: the cupola of Saint Peter's basilica is immense; we know that when Michelangelo saw the Pantheon, which was the largest temple in Rome, he said that he wanted to build a similar temple but place it high in the air. He built the dome of Saint Peter's church in imitation; but he designed such massive columns that the dome does not seem at all heavy to the eye of the observer, although it towers like a mountain above our heads. Thus the soul hesitates between what it sees and what it knows, and it remains surprised to see a bulky mass that is at one and the same time so enormous and so light.

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**Concerning the elements of beauty that arise  
from a kind of uncertainty of the soul .**

The soul is frequently surprised because it cannot reconcile what it sees with what it has seen previously. There is a large lake in Italy, called Lake Maggiore; it is a small ocean whose shores are entirely wild. In this lake, at a distance of fifteen [ sic ] miles from the shore, there are two islands with a circumference of a quarter mile, called Isole Borromee . In my opinion they are the most delightful spots in the world. The soul is astonished by this romantic [22] contrast, it remembers with pleasure the marvels described in novels where we cross rocky and arid regions, and then find ourselves in a fairyland.

All contrasts make an impression on us, because two objects placed in opposition set each other off. When a small man stands next to one who is tall, the small man makes the other seem taller, and the tall man makes the former seem smaller.

This sort of surprise is the cause of the pleasure we derive from any beauty based on contrast, from antitheses and similar figures of speech. Florus writes, "Who would believe that Sora and Algidus were once a threat to us; that Satricum and Corniculum used to be provinces; that we once triumphed over the inhabitants of Bovillae and Verulae whom we

now disdain; and that at one time we would go to the capitol to pray for success in conquering Tibur, now our suburb, and Praeneste, where we now have our country houses?" [23] This author depicts for us at the same time the greatness of Rome and its small beginnings, and our astonishment is aroused by both these facts.

Here we can see what a difference there is between antithetical ideas and antithetical expressions. The antithesis of the expressions is not concealed, as is the antithesis of the ideas; the latter is always clothed in the same manner, the former changes at will; one antithesis is varied, the other is not.

When this same Florus speaks of the Samnites, he states that their cities were so completely destroyed that it would now be difficult to find the country which was the occasion for twenty-four triumphs: *ut non facile appareat materia quattuor et viginti triumphorum* . [24] By the very words describing the destruction of this nation, he shows us its greatness and its unyielding courage.

When we try to keep from laughing, we laugh twice as hard because of the contrast that exists between the situation in which we find ourselves and the situation in which we should be. Similarly, when we see a great flaw in a face, such as a very big nose, we laugh because we realize that this contrast with the other features should not exist. Thus, flaws, as well as beauty, are an effect of contrasts. Whenever we see contrasts for which there is no reason, or perceive that they set off or highlight another flaw, they are the chief cause of ugliness; and ugliness can, if it comes upon us suddenly, arouse a certain kind of glee in our soul and make us laugh. If, on the other hand, our soul considers ugliness a misfortune in the particular person who is ugly, then pity can be aroused. When the soul looks on ugliness with the idea that it might be harmful and compares it with those objects that customarily move us and arouse our desires, then the soul looks on it with a feeling of aversion.

The same is true of our ideas when they contain a contrast that goes against common sense. When this contrast is vulgar and easily discovered,

it does not please us and constitutes a flaw because it causes no surprise; if on the other hand it is too farfetched, it does not please us either. Such ideas must be effective in a work because they belong there, and not because an effort was made to stress them, for in the latter case we are only surprised by the author's stupidity.

We find the naïve especially pleasing but no style is more difficult to master. This is because it falls in between high and low style, and is so close to the latter that one has difficulty continually skirting low style without stumbling.

Musicians realize that the music easiest to sing is the hardest to compose. This is incontrovertible proof of the fact that art and the pleasures it arouses lie within definite limits.

When we see that Corneille's lines are so grandiloquent and Racine's so natural, we would not guess that Corneille wrote easily and Racine with difficulty.

Low style is the sublime of the common people; they love to see something which is made for them and which they can understand.

The ideas that occur to those who have good upbringing and great intelligence can be naïve or noble or sublime.

It seems noble to us to see an object magnified by its context. This is especially apparent in comparisons, where the mind must always gain and never lose: comparisons must always add something, render the object greater to our eyes, or, if it is not a question of greatness, render it finer and more subtle. Great care must be taken not to show the soul any comparison that detracts from the object, for even if the soul had discovered such a comparison, it would have concealed it from itself.

Since a comparison is designed to reveal subtleties, the soul prefers to see one manner compared to another, or one action to another, rather than to see one object compared to another, such as a hero to a lion, a woman to a star, and a fleet-footed man to a stag.

Michelangelo excels in imparting nobility to all his subjects. In his famous "Bacchus" he does not proceed like the Flemish painters who show us a falling figure arrested, so to speak, in mid-air. This would be unworthy of the majesty of a god. Michelangelo depicts him standing squarely on his feet, but he is so successful in giving him the cheerful appearance of drunkenness, and in showing his pleasure as he watches the flow of the liquor he is pouring into his cup, that there exists nothing more admirable.

In the "Passion," which hangs in the gallery in Florence, he has painted the Virgin standing and looking at her crucified son without showing any sorrow, pity, regret, or tears. Michelangelo imagines that she already knows this great mystery and hence has her bear the sight of his death with fortitude.

Each one of Michelangelo's works is marked by a certain nobility. We find greatness even in his preliminary sketches, as we do in Virgil's unfinished lines.

In the room in Mantua where he represents Jupiter hurling thunderbolts at the giants, Giulio Romano [25] depicts all the gods as being frightened. But Juno, who stands next to Jupiter, 'seems untroubled as she shows him a giant whom he should strike down. This gives Jupiter an air of greatness not shared by the other gods; the closer they are to him, the less afraid they are, and this is quite natural, for in a battle no fear is felt by those who are close to the one who has the advantage. . . . Here ends the fragment .

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*The glory of Montesquieu rests on works of genius and did not require the publication of these fragments he left us. Yet they will bear eternal witness to the interest the great men of the nation took in our work; and the centuries to come will note that Voltaire and Montesquieu too had a share in the Encyclopédie .*

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<sup>i</sup> 10. [André le Nôtre (1613–1700) designed the gardens of Versailles.]

11. [Florus (Lucius Annaeus, or Julius, or Publius Annii) was a Roman writer who lived from the late first to the early second century A.D. He was the author of an abridged history of Rome, *Epitomae de Tito Livio Bellorum Omnium Annorum* DCC Libri II, which was a popular schoolbook from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century. The passage quoted is I. 22. 21.]

12. [Ibid., I. 23. 11.]

13. [Ibid., I. 22. 11.]

14. [Ibid., I. 24. 5.]

15. [Montesquieu's interest in the Gothic style extended beyond these cursory remarks. His papers contain fragments of a projected essay, *De la manière gothique* (Montesquieu, *Oeuvres complètes*, "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade," [Paris: Gallimard, 1950] I, 966–972), apparently inspired by what he had seen on his travels, in which he defines Gothic as "the style characteristic of the beginning of art or of its concluding phase" (p. 966). His comments in "Taste" are typical of the appreciation of Gothic in eighteenth-century France, as a style in which the beauty of the basic design is destroyed by excessive and incongruous ornamentation. See: Wolfgang Herrmann, *Laugier and Eighteenth-Century French Theory* (London: A. Zwemmer, 1962), especially Chaps. V, "Gothic through Classical Eyes," and VI, "Embellished Gothic."]

16. [Jaucourt makes similar observations in "Symmetry" ( *Symmetrie* ), where he writes: "Symmetry is the basis of architectural beauty, but it destroys the beauty of almost all the other arts. . . . Nothing is more contrary to striking impressions, to variety, to surprise than symmetry: as soon as you see one part, symmetry foretells all the others and seems to excuse you from looking at them."]

17. [Suetonius (69– ca. 140), *Lives of the Caesars* VI. 40. 1. Montesquieu is apparently quoting from memory; Suetonius does not use *monstrum* but writes: *Talem principem paulo minus quattuordecim annos perpersus orbis tandem destituit* .]

18. [I.e., *castrati* .]

19. [Literally, the "I don't know what"; the expression was a key term in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century criticism.]



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20. [Veronese (1528–1588), Raphael (1483–1520), and Correggio (1489–1534) were Italian Renaissance painters with whose works Montesquieu had become familiar during his travels in Italy in 1728.]

21. [Roman poet (39–65), author of the *Pharsalia* , the most important Latin epic poem after Virgil's *Aeneid* .]

22. [The French is *romanesque*. The expression *romantique* only entered the language in the later eighteenth century.]

23. [ *Epitomae de Tito Livio Bellorum Omnium Annorum DCC* ; Montesquieu quotes here from I. 5. *Algidus* is a region in the Alban Hills near Rome, conquered in 431 B.C., while *Sora*, *Satricum*, *Corniculum*, *Bovillae*, and *Verulae* were small towns in *Latium*, within a few miles of Rome. *Tibur* is the modern *Tivoli*, *Praeneste* is today called *Palestrina*.]

24. [ *Ibid.* , I. 11.]

25. [Giulio Romano (1499–1546), principal disciple of Raphael; Montesquieu is here referring to the *Sala dei Giganti* in the *Palazzo del Te*.]